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REPETITIONS AND REFLECTIONS IN CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD

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ABSTRACT

Gabriel García Márquez' Chronicle of a Death Foretold is a spiralling search for satisfying explanations of why events occur as they do. The first sentences prefigure the book's concern with the nature of memory and our perception of reality as describable in words. The narrator's declared intention of reassembling "the broken mirror of memory" allows the scrutiny of many kinds of reflections: dream images, recollections and retrospective insights, repetitions and contradictions. Memory is both individual and collective; separate voices are joined in a town history. The story of a small town murder becomes a chronicle of a universal need to understand the purpose of life. The fallibility of memory and of words is expanded into the impossibility of recovering the past objectively. We are able to perceive repeated patterns of behavior but the meaning of history eludes us. Interwoven throughout the cycling narrative fabric of repetitions, mockeries and fragmented insights are affirmations of the creativity and strength of human imagination, and Chronicle is ultimately a celebration of the power of words, despite the inadequacy of language to mirror objective reality.

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Gabriel García Márquez' Chronicle of a Death Foretold is a text of spiralling reflections and repetitions centered around a narrator's efforts to understand the truth of a murder which occurred twenty-seven years previously. "It has the very precise structure of a detective story,"[1] García Márquez has said; in another interview, he described it as a tale "structured as carefully as clockwork."[2] The short novel examines the narrator's initial journalistic assumption that by assembling enough factual evidence, enough eye witness accounts, and every scrap of written testimony, he can reassemble the past, put back together "the broken mirror of memory" (p. 6).[3] But the shards of broken mirror reflect many aspects of truth, and if the narrator is wiser at the end of his quest, it is in unexpected ways. Chronicle includes reflection of events in memory, in dreams, in written texts, and in texts which reflect earlier texts. The reflections are arranged in spirals of near repetitions, near reiterations, which progress through cumulative familiarity to allow generalization about the subjectivity of memory, the inseparability of

fact and interpretation and, finally, the inherent fallibility of journalistic report or written history, and the insufficiency of words to depict (or reflect) human experience.

The first sentences as prefiguration

Gabriel García Márquez has often said that "almost always, the origin of my story is an image,"[4] that he needs to have this initial visual image clear in his mind in order to build a story upon it.[5] He has said that the expression of this image in the first sentence of a book is of great importance "because the first sentence can be the laboratory for determining many elements of the style, the structure, and even the length of the book."[6]

The first sentences of Chronicle do prefigure the book's concern with the nature of memory, perception of reality, subjectivity, premonition and temporality:

> On the day they were going to kill him, Santiago Nasar got up at five-thirty in the morning to wait for the boat the bishop was coming on. He'd dreamed he was going through a grove of timber trees where a gentle drizzle was falling, and for an instant he was happy in his dream, but when he awoke he felt completely spattered with bird shit. "He was always dreaming about trees," Plácida Linero, his mother, told me twenty-seven years later, recalling the details of that distressing Monday. (p. 3)

The first sentence sets forth authoritatively, with journalistic concision, the central fact of the book (Nasar's murder) and a point in

time (5:30) when this first of a series of overlayered accounts begins (reminding us that this is a chronicle, a chronology of events). Oddly, however, the unadorned certainty of the murder, although given precedence of place in the sentence, is presented in a subordinate clause as though it were a casual reference, an ordinary event to be presented matter-of-factly, an occurrence easily coupled with everyday actions. The story is being told in retrospect by a narrator who speaks from a time after the murder has taken place, by a narrator who allows the as yet unconsummated disaster to cast its ominous shadow over the description that follows. We look for clues in the bishop's arrival and in the account of Nasar's dream. We seek a foreshadowing of death in the description of the dream only to realize in the third sentence that the retrospective anxiety and eagerness to perceive premonition, emotions in which we have participated because of the way in which the story is told, are the emotions of Nasar's mother as she evokes memories of the past, as she tells the account of the dream the way she remembers it (or rather as the author has the narrator choose to describe her recollection of it). There is constant tension throughout Chronicle between what we expect and what we get, between proliferating separate images and a human desire to generalize.

The book's first two sentences appear as objective third-person statements but in the third, objectivity is unmasked as the chatter of Santiago Nasar's mother as she reminisces to the narrator. Plácida's remark also contrasts with the portentous tone of the dream description: her generalization comments upon and makes fun of the

dream just as the Chronicle as a whole both takes seriously and makes fun of the genre of the murder mystery.

The limitations of reflections.

The dream description includes imagery of awakening from the damp vegetal happiness of tropical sleep to harsh morning light and the sweaty discomfort of a hangover (as we are told in the next paragraph). But it is an awakening into a sensation which is more unreal, more literally untrue (bird shit) than the dream which may echo the rain which we soon find out may or may not have been falling on the morning of the murder. All through Chronicle we are presented with images which may be mirror reflections, as we seek understanding of an event of 27 years ago as it is reflected in the mirrors of memory. But we become increasingly aware that a mirror may be held and tipped in a countless number of ways to reflect different aspects and that although the reflections may give us glimpses they never convey a total picture; a reflection is by its nature superficial and limited and there is no use asking it to be more.

The narrator's declared desire is to reassemble and comprehend the complete experience of the past by finding all of the fragments "so many scattered shards" of "the broken mirror of memory" (p. 6). Thousands of scattered bits are scrutinized in the text but the coherent whole becomes more and more elusive. A fragment like Nasar's dream of trees and bird shit is presented, commented upon, set down again, picked up later in the text like an odd jigsaw puzzle piece that

must fit but doesn't quite, and it finally becomes part of the reconstructed story of the murder through repetition and familiarity rather than because it really explains anything else.

Dreams more plausible than reality.

Nasar's mother has the first try at deciphering her son's dream (and here in the third sentence of the story we become very aware of the layers of voices: of the author who presents a text built upon the reportorial skills of the narrator who arranges the results of interviews where, in turn, people speak of what others said or did or dreamt about or lied about; often there are as many as five layers of filtering perceptions involved). Twenty seven years after "that distressing Monday," Plácida Linero recalls, evokes, the details of the dream her son recounted and she tries to generalize ("he was always dreaming about trees"), unable to decipher the augury even retrospectively. No one could understand at the time how the murder could have happened, and twenty seven years later, despite the narrator's access to masses of information (personal recollections, the investigating magistrate's report, innumerable interviews, revisions of testimony, confessions), nothing is any clearer. The historical method is as fallible as immediate human intuition; the passing years have brought not wisdom nor insight but simply a greater accumulation of detail selectively remembered, altered and rearranged.

The entire narrative has a dream-like (or nightmare-like) quality which is underscored by the accounts of actual dreams, like

Santiago Nasar´s, which seem more plausible, more banal and hence less frightening than the reality which is repeatedly said to seem like a dream but one from which, terrifyingly, there is no awakening. The greatest horror of all is the implacable lucidity and insomnia which affect the Vicarios after the murder. Years later, when Pablo Vicario explains to the narrator what that interminable day was like, he says: "It was like being awake twice over" (pp. 78-9).

Over and over again, reality is described as dream-like, ghost and vision populated. Santiago Nasar, crossing the village square, "looked like a ghost" (p. 15); Bayardo San Rómán, when he appears on Pura Vicario´s doorstep, "had that green color of dreams" (p. 46), and the Vicario brothers seem like sleepwalkers, like dream figures, "insomniac sleepwalkers" (p. 15). Entering Bayardo San Román´s house during an eclipse, "things looked like they were under water," the mayor told me" (p. 84). Plácida Linero, in early morning light, "had an unreal look." ("`It was like an apparition,´ Cristo Bedoya told me" p. 106). Divina Flor´s literal belief in her dream vision of Santiago Nasar (p. 116) is directly responsible for his death. And in the very moment of the brutal murder, the Vicarios find themselves stabbing away

> floating in the dazzling backwater they had found on the other side of fear. They didn´t hear the shouts of the whole town, frightened by its own crime. "I felt the way you do when you´re galloping on horseback," Pablo Vicario declared. But they both suddenly woke up to reality . . . (p. 118)

Dying, Santiago staggers off "in a state of hallucination" (p. 119).

The narrator himself seems like a ghost to those who live in the past, to Pura Vicario and to Plácida Linero.

No one in the town can believe the evidence of eyes and ears; when the Vicarios sharpen their knives and declare their intention of killing Santiago Nasar, "their reputation as good people was so well-founded that no one paid any attention to them" (p. 52). When they tell Clotilde Armenta, "she couldn't believe she'd heard right" (p. 54) and to Flora Miguel "it seemed inconceivable" (p. 112). For a great variety of reasons, no one can accept that reality should be so simple, motivations so direct, cause and effect so evidently linked. The novel is a chronicle of search for complexity, for concealed underlying truths, for satisfying explanations of why events occur as they do. From beginning to end, the search fails. Plácida Linero, still trying to understand her son's dream of 27 years before, accepts only the guilt she can bear: "she never forgave herself for having mixed up the magnificent augury of trees with the unlucky one of birds" (p. 98). When we encounter the dream in the book's second sentence and Plácida's generalizing remark in the third, we do not yet know of her responsibility for her son's death (through the misinterpretation of signs, through believing Divina Flor's vision, through not seeing a complete or accurate picture from the window, through mistaking the origin of sounds: a whole series of fatal misapprehensions) or that this is a woman whose life has stopped for twenty-seven years, and yet our first impressions of her are as valid as our last: more information does not make us wiser even on an

individual, personal level.

Repetitions and contradictions.

Direct conversation alternates with the narrator's observations, which often qualify and modify the voices he records. As the book progresses, each new voice adds to our composite knowledge of the events of the day of the murder but it also revises and undermines the information which has preceded it. The story of Santiago Nasar's morning is told over and over again, in a spiral of near repetitions. We circle around and around the central mysteries of the tale, listening to stories and contradictions, disagreements and confirmations. Never are we allowed to escape the contradictory nature of individual testimony about facts. In the second paragraph, in the very first descriptions of Santiago Nasar's morning, hilarious contradiction dispells any inclination we might have to believe witnesses literally. Everyone remembers Santiago Nasar as

> a little sleepy but in a good mood, and he remarked to all of them that it was a very beautiful day. No one was certain if he was referring to the state of the weather. Many people coincided in recalling that it was a radiant morning with a sea breeze coming in through the banana groves. . . . But most agreed that the weather was funereal . . . and that at the moment of the misfortune a thin drizzle was falling like the one Santiago Nasar had seen in his dream grove. (p. 4)

Angelo Vicario's memories of her relationship with Bayardo are

similarly undercut and spoofed by collective disagreement. She tells the narrator that the landlady had told her that Bayardo had said (four levels of recall already) he would marry her; "three people who had been in the boardinghouse confirmed that it had taken place, but four others weren't sure" (p. 29). And yet as we cycle through the story of the murder again and again, an account of the occurrences of the day as they are important to the observers does begin to emerge clearly.

Sensory images and repetition.

Also in spirals throughout the text, we are given vivid physical images -- like mental snapshots or short filmstrips -- which have been engraved on the memories of the inhabitants of the town. Often these are referred to in static terms, as when we are told that "the most intense image" (p. 44) of the wedding party is that of the old man in the center of the patio, and when people speak repeatedly of "the last image" they had of Santiago Nasar (e.g. p. 6) or of Bayardo San Román. The very word last comes to have a rhythmic recurrent shutter-clicking Greek chorus quality: "the last time we saw him" (p. 57), "the last time they saw him" (p. 104).

The narrator is a collector of these mental images. Eagerly, he responds to the words offered him by Plácida Linero and exults: "I saw him in her memory" (p. 74). He has been able to see Santiago Nasar in the mirror surface of his mother's recollection, see the snapshot of the long ago instant. But all of this vivid seeing (and smelling and hearing) is accomplished in words, and an awareness of verbal artifice

and limitation is woven through the text. The physical images cycle through the text, mentioned and repeated, modified and finally interconnected. The scene of the disembowelling of the rabbits which so disgusts Santiago Nasar is finally linked to the parallel disembowelling of Santiago Nasar himself. The church bells ring over and over again and finally toll explicitly for the death of Santiago Nasar. The "baptistry smell" (p. 7) is mentioned again and again and is the foul personal odor of Santiago Nasar as he dies. The note on the hall floor which people repeatedly fail to see is finally read. The image of Santiago Nasar carrying red roses (p. 116) becomes the hideous final image of the murder victim holding his intestines in his hands.

Memory.

The narrator presents his own memory as a tabula rasa, scuffled over with vague and hazy recollections, which he wishes to fill with a coherent understanding of what happened. The narrator will accept all information in his eagerness to compile a total picture. He admits that "I had a very confused memory of the festival before I decided to rescue it piece by piece from the memory of others" (p. 43). Memory in Chronicle is both individual and collective; individual variants are subsumed into a town history. The voices proliferate during the course of the account. Veritable throngs of hitherto unmentioned people seem to come rushing up to add their testimony. The narrator observes that "in the course of the investigations for this chronicle I recovered numerous marginal experiences" (p. 43). People's lives are thus

recovered, collective memory is forged and preserved through the writing of history, but García Márquez never allows us to forget the fallible and perishable nature of written words. Throughout the early part of Chronicle, the text of the official document of the investigating magistrate's inquiry is quoted as an authoritative model of rationality although the investigator, like everyone else, is seen to seek complexity rather than simplicity of motive.(see p. 12). We are told that people lied in their official testimony for various reasons; since the narrator is presumably now getting the true story, the illusion is created that we will now have access to the "real truth" of the matter. A counterpoint of versions is established as stories behind stories are revealed ("According to what they told me years later. . . ." p. 49 "That fact, like many others, was not reported in the brief. Actually, Santiago Nasar . . . but in any case, it wasn't certain. . . ." p. 50) and like balls juggled in the air, each as valid as another, we have at least three versions to choose from (. . . they declared to the investigator . . . they told me . . . still, everybody knew . . ." p. 50). We are encouraged to believe that people are cautious about what they put on public record. "Nevertheless . . .," "and still . . ." and "but on the other hand . . ." become rhythmic recurrences in the narrative. Gradually, a tapestry of voices is woven and we are ready to accept the town obsession with the murder:

> For years we couldn't talk about anything else. Our daily conduct, dominated then by so many linear habits, had suddenly begun to

> spin around a single common anxiety. The cocks of dawn would catch us trying to give order to the chain of many chance events that had made absurdity possible, and it was obvious that we weren't doing it from an urge to clear up mysteries but because none of us could go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned to us by fate. (p. 96)

The spirals of the story are made explicit; the desire to understand the murder is overtly shifted to a universal need to grapple with the purpose of life.

The fallibility of history.

Just after engaging us in this obsessive enterprise of attempting to make sense of apparently random "chance events," García Márquez sweeps along to undercut and demolish seriousness by reducing the official document to parody; the investigating magistrate exists only in his text; despite all the fantasizing about him, the truth is, admits the narrator,

> I never discovered his name. Everything we know about his character has been learned from the brief, which several people helped me look for twenty years later in the Palace of Justice in Riochacha. There was no classification of files whatever, and more than a century of cases were piled up on the floor of the decrepit colonial building that had been Sir Francis Drake's headquarters for two days. The ground floor would be flooded by high tides and the unbound volumes floated about the deserted offices. I

> searched many times with the water up to my ankles in that lagoon of lost causes, and after five years rummaging around only chance let me rescue some 322 pages filched from the more than 500 that the brief must have contained. (pp. 98-9)

The whole text of Chronicle is a delicate balancing act, as illustrated by the two passages above. The closer the narrator comes to clarifying the nature of his inquiry, the more fully the absurdity of the quest is exposed. Insofar as this is a search for self definition through an examination of the recent historical past then in the passages immediately following, historical documentation is ridiculed, cast into hilarious doubt. Many Latin Americans believe that if they can comprehend the true nature of their colonial experience, they will be able to define who they are and not only understand but resolve their contemporary problems. García Márquez does not ridicule this desire but he does underscore the absurdity of giving particular credence to individual stories or to old papers which are, after all, an arbitrary selection of words put on paper (to be preserved by chance, found by chance, related to other words by pure coincidence) by individuals who may or may not be perceptive or even honest about their observations. The farther into the past we look, the more difficult it becomes to know how to evaluate information, the more dependent we become on individual chroniclers. García Márquez has long been fascinated by the early chroniclers of the Americas and usually makes the point that the marvels described by them as real surpass any invented fantasy, that what people wanted to believe and what they

thought they observed blended indistinguishably.[7]

In Chronicle, García Márquez shows how impossible it is to find out what occurred a mere 27 years ago. The narrator is a most diligent historical investigator: he travels about over a period of years and interviews everyone he can find who lived in the (unnamed) town 27 years before. He speaks of interviewing many of the older people just before they die, which makes us aware that this is the last possible moment for gathering this particular kind of historical evidence. Plácida Linero is "prostrated by the last lights of old age" (p. 6) and the narrator collects testimony from Victoria Guzmán "when I came to see her, a short time before her death" (pp. 8-9). Although some stories can only be told after someone has died (e.g. "Divina Flor confessed to me on a later visit, after her mother had died . . ." p. 13) these tales are farther removed from first hand observation and recollection. The past recedes quickly and there is no way to recover it objectively.

Repetitive patterns.

What stands out in memory is repetition, patterns that may be seen to recur. Plácida Linero initially "confused me with the memory of Santiago Nasar" (p. 7) when he stands on the same doorstep, as though a moment can repeat itself. People's lives repeat the patterns of their parents'; Santiago Nasar repeats his father's appearance (pp. 7-8), language, values, interests and profession. Victoria Guzmán says of him: "He was just like his father" (p. 10). Divina Flor never doubts

(she "knew that she was destined" p. 10) that she will repeat (with Santiago Nasar) the pattern of her mother's affair with Ibrahim Nasar. Emphasis is placed upon the familiar repetitive habits of daily life: what time people habitually do things, what they wear, what door they use, what they say. The town blames the interruption of these daily patterns (by the bishop's visit) for the murder, and yet it is stressed that ritual repetitions of most usual actions do occur, that people can be counted on to always be the same. Even small gestures echo each other; as Margot goes off Santiago Nasar "took leave of her with the same wave with which he'd said good-bye to his mother" (p. 19).

Within Chronicle, repetition of the account of the morning of the murder serves both to incorporate a vast quantity of detail as different witnesses testify and to convey a progressive expectation of imminent understanding. Witnesses are constantly saying that they understand retrospectively what was puzzling to them at the time and we are led to believe that we will, too. But over and over again we are told that this is an illusion. Whether the account moves backward chronologically, like peeling off the outer onion layers one by one, or forward through the ticking minutes of the morning of the murder, apocalyptic moments of revelation are ridiculed. Victoria Guzmán does not really understand anything when she finally thinks she comprehends Santiago Nasar's horror at the rabbit entrails; she simply joins the throng of those who (in retrospect) recall premonitions. Divina Flor remembers Santiago Nasar grabbing her "with a hand that felt frozen and stony, like the hand of a dead man" (p. 13). There is no comfort in this

collective recall of premonition. As she describes watching Cristo Bedoya and Santiago Nasar,

> Escolástica Cisneros thought she noticed that the two friends were walking in the center of [the crowd] without any difficulty, inside an empty circle, because everyone knew that Santiago Nasar was about to die and they didn't dare to touch him. (p. 102)

Retrospective premonition justifies inaction. The hollow circle is also an image of our own lack of insight about what exists at the very center of the story. It is also an image of our ability to regard real events as theatrical performances, thus justifying our lack of participation.

Reflections of **One Hundred Years of Solitude**.

The text of the chronicle, which incorporates some of the fragmentary text of the magistrate's report, is also a repetition (in the spiral pattern of similar but not identical) of García Marquéz' 1967 novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude, that is also a family chronicle that incorporates a written history (Melquíades') of the family. One Hundred Years is also about memory, about repetition, about history and our relationship to what we perceive as history, about texts and words and the impossibility of grasping "reality" and ever fully understanding a time or a person. Recollection of the events of one hundred years ago, or even of twenty seven years ago, forces us beyond personal experience into dependence on stories which have fused with myth and legend and distorted collective memory.

García Márquez connects the two fictional accounts not only by their shared concerns and shared geography (the Guajira peninsula of northeastern Colombia, the towns of Riohacha and Manaure, although the mythic town of Macondo is not mentioned in Chronicle) but also by a series of explicit references and deliberate echoes. Bayardo San Román's whole astonishing family comes right out of One Hundred Years, out of that world of myth and fiction which centers around Colonel Aureliano Buendía and Gerineldo Márquez (in Chronicle, p. 47). Many of the townspeople of Chronicle share the surnames of possible ancestors in One Hundred Years: Dr. Dionisio Iguarán ("my mother's cousin" p. 43) and Prudencia Cotes (p. 62) are there, and Mercedes Barcha reappears as the girlfriend and later wife of the narrator (and, of course, of Gabriel García Márquez). The mythic adventures of the second José Arcadio are echoed in the conjectures about Bayardo:

> It came to be said that he had wiped out villages and sown terror in Casanare at troop commander, that he had escaped from Devil's Island, that he'd been seen in Pernambuco trying to make a living with a pair of trained bears, and that he'd salvaged the remain of a Spanish galleon loaded with gold in the Windward Passage. (p. 33)

The passages of One Hundred Years which are being echoed are ones in which, in turn, we find echoes of other fictions. For instance (to give just one example); José Arcadio describes how

> Under a bright noonday sun in the Gulf of Bengal his ship had killed a sea dragon, in the stomach of which they found the helmet, the buckles, and the weapons of a Crusader. In the Caribbean he

> had seen the ghost of the pirate ship of Victor Hugues, with its sails torn by the winds of death, the masts chewed by sea worms, and still looking for the course to Guadeloupe. (One Hundred Years of Solitude [New York: Avon Books, 1970], p. 93.)

A passage like this refers us to a story within a story, a history within a history (the traces of a Crusader within a mythic beast) and a fiction within a fiction (Victor Hugues' ship from Alejo Carpentier's novel, Explosion in a Cathedral exists as a ghost in a fictional account of adventures within García Márquez' novel). Thus the echoes are echoes of echoes, and echoed again in Chronicle by the reference to the bishop's boat, "snorting like a dragon" (p. 16).

Other reflections of One Hundred Years in Chronicle abound. The Elephant's eating exploits in One Hundred Years are recalled in María Alejandrina Cervantes' "Babylonic platter of things to eat" (p. 77). There are parallel stories of exaggerated coincidence (recounted in breathless single sentences) like that of the bullet which demolishes the plaster saint (p. 12). The connection between Ursula and José Arcadio in One Hundred Years is echoed in Plácida's "eternal headache that her son had left her" (pp. 6-7) and the tenacious reek of gunpowder is recalled by the persistant odor of Santiago Nasar which the narrator still smells 27 years later (p. 13).

One Hundred Years and Chronicle share a world which refers back to Sir Francis Drake (Chronicle, p. 98), where characters wander in from mysterious origins (Rebeca, Bayardo) and remain enigmatic, where superstitions intertwine with objective reasoning, where people speak

often of their destinies which are or are not fulfilled, where solitude and sadness are often the human lot, a small town world where wives and whores coexist comfortably, where many are interrelated and know each other well, where an ancient honor code is taken seriously and presumed offenders are punished with their lives or with lifelong seclusion (Angela's mother carries her off to "bury her alive" p. 88, just as Fernanda carries off Meme.) Just as the Biblical references and parallels (e.g. Remedios the Beauty and the ascension of the Virgin) remind us in One Hundred Years that these stories have been told before, that every fiction is connected to the whole of Western cultural heritage (that every text is connected to past texts, every set of words to past arrangements of words) so, too, the light parallels in Chronicle remind us similarly: the wound on Santiago Nasar's hand that "looked like a stigma of the crucified Christ" (p. 75) reminds us of that other execution everyone knew about and no one stopped, of that other death which became a collective centering obsession. Santiago Nasar has died for a collective abstract notion of honor; in a sense, he has died for humanity, for it is never clear that he is personally guilty of anything at all. The presence of One Hundred Years is in no way necessary to the understanding of Chronicle, but García Márquez' linking references make it clear that he does not deny the resonance of connection.

Literature and journalism.

The narrator's explicit initial assumption in Chronicle is that

more facts will provide understanding. Not surprisingly, considering his life-long career as a reporter for various newspapers, García Márquez has spoken often (as in an interview in Playboy [February, 1983], p. 67) of being "fascinated by the relationship between literature and journalism." Throughout Chronicle, journalistic techniques are interwoven with less literal descriptions. But the significance of lives and events eludes factual pursuit. We are made increasingly conscious of how much we do not know. In the case of Bayardo San Román, everyone's ignorance is hilarious: no one knows anything about him and when the narrator visits him,

> [he] refused to supply even the most insignificant fact that might clarify a little his participation in the drama. In any case, not even his family knew much more about him than we did, nor did they have the slightest idea of what he had come to do in a mislaid town, with no other apparent aim than to marry a woman he had never seen. (p. 87)

Forgetfulness is blamed for inaccurate recall (e.g. what comes to be a comedy routine about the weather) but so is memory: the desire to remember what we want to remember. Memory deforms and selects, omits and changes. Memory filters reality just as dreams provide partial glimpses and poor light encourages imaginative misinterpretations of what is actually seen. Retrospective deformation and the illusions of dim light are fused in memory: Clotilde Armenta recalls seeing Santiago Nasar as a ghost in the dawn light. Hortensia Baute remembers: "I saw the knives in the light from the street lamp and it

looked to me like they were dripping blood" (p. 62). People cannot sort out what they saw at the time and what they think later that they must have seen. Nor is there any sorting out the extent to which the murder was allowed to occur because people assumed it had already taken place because they had heard about it (the relationship of words to actions, of literature to reality: another version of whether historical events exist in any way objectively or only through the accounts in words of those events). The problem is that not only is it impossible to separate description of events from the events themselves in a sequential sense but that words themselves are a tricky medium. Repeatedly we are told that people do not say what they mean. They may lie for countless different reasons. And how are we to recognize truth when we encounter it? Bayardo is perfectly straightforward about why he has come to town;

> It might have been true, but he would have answered anything else in the same way, because he had a way of speaking that served to conceal rather than to reveal. (p. 26)

Similarly, none of the butchers believes that the Vicarios will kill Santiago Nasar even though "twenty-two people declared they had heard everything said" (p. 51). People do or don't believe in accord not with the words but with their own personal whimsy or evaluation of the speaker. People love to gossip and exaggerate and give credence to scandal and ulterior motives. Imagination flourishes in the absence of information. Even the narrator assumes duplicity on the part of his informants; he is sure that Angela Vicario "spoke about her misfortune

without any shame in order to cover up the other misfortune, the real one, that was burning in her insides" (p. 91). The less people know about Bayardo San Román the wilder their speculations; "he was so reserved about his origins that even the most demented invention could have been true" (p. 33). García Márquez turns this into a joke by having Bayardo's family more than fulfill the wildest speculations: they come right out of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta or a Spanish zarauela melodrama.

Partial and prejudiced information is also provided by the texts within the text, the three sets of letters and the magistrate's official document. Santiago Nasar's letters are referred to as out and out lies (love letters to a woman he does not love) and Angela Vicario's (unread by their recipient) are missives of passion and delirium, outrageous fictions which "lastly . . . were the indignant letters of an abandoned wife who invented cruel illnesses to make him return" (p. 94). The narrator's account of the letters his mother wrote to him at school emphasizes the vagueness of the scraps of information she relays and the suspenseful installment-plan sequence of this communication. The narrator is dependent on her for information, yet she leaves out everything of importance, later excusing herself for not telling him of the imminent wedding because she hadn't known about it until it was "already too late to correct the October letter" (pp. 27-8) or of her impressions of Bayardo because "things like that shouldn't be put into writing" (p. 28). A conventional notion of the journalist-historian's dependable informant is also parodied in the

description of the magistrate's report. Not only is the official document only partially intact (just as all communications in Chronicle are partial, incomplete) but beyond that, it is perfectly clear that the magistrate himself

> was a man burning with the fever of literature. He had doubtless read the Spanish classics and a few Latin ones, and he was quite familiar with Nietzche, who was the fashionable author among magistrates of his time. The marginal notes, and not just because of the color of the ink, seemed to be written in blood. He was so perplexed by the enigma that fate had touched him with, that he kept falling into lyrical distractions that ran contrary to the rigor of his profession. Most of all, he never thought it legitimate that life should make use of so many coincidences forbidden literature, so that there should be the untrammeled fulfillment of a death so clearly foretold. (p. 99)

The coincidences of life are repeatedly spoken of as stranger than anything anyone can imagine. When the narrator ("during an uncertain period when I was . . . selling encyclopedias and medical books" p. 88: involved even then -- as was García Márquez himself -- with texts that purport to be factual accounts) encounters Angela Vicario, he cannot believe it

> because I couldn't bring myself to admit that life might end up resembling bad literature so much. (pp. 88-9)

The journalist-narrator would like to depend on facts. Diligently, he interviews, resurrects lost texts, writes it all down. But facts are

ridiculed. Santiago Nasar is a collector of facts and details: he and Cristo Bedoya are so immersed in figuring out to the last cent how much the wedding cost that they do not notice what every one else in town knows. Facts obscure intuitions. This is magnificently clear in the case of Angela Vicario's letters to Bayardo San Román. From the moment when she sees "her own thoughts reflected in the mirrors repeated around the room," (p. 92) a mirror image of Bayardo, Angela is "reborn" (p. 92). Through the process of writing letters to Bayardo, she becomes "mistress of her fate for the first time" (p. 93). By being able to write it out, transform the disorder of daily life into arrangements of words, into literature,

> she became lucid, overbearing, mistress of her own free will, and she became a virgin again just for him, and she recognized no other authority than her own nor any other service than that of her obsession. (p. 93)

The power of her writing is so great, Bayardo returns, bringing with him a suitcase of her letters, "arranged by date in bundles tied with colored ribbons, . . . all unopened" (p. 95). It is the act of writing that has been important, that has enabled Angela to get hold of herself. Bayardo is as much a <u>reflection</u> of the wishes of others as ever and appears in response to Angela's commanding emotion.

It is Angela's evocation of his name which ultimately kills Santiago Nasar. When her brothers insist, just after she has been returned home on her wedding night, that she give them a name, that she say something,

> She looked for it in the shadows, she found it at first sight among the many, many easily confused names from this world and the other, and she nailed it to the wall with her well-aimed dart, like a butterfly with no will whose sentence has always been written. (p. 47)

One of the many things we never find out is why Angela Vicario responds as she does to this question. It is seeming chance which brings Santiago Nasar's name to the surface of her mind at the crucial moment and thus sets in motion the machinery of a conventional, traditional honor code which no longer corresponds to how anyone feels. The Vicario brothers are actors in a centuries-old play which may once have reflected society but no longer has much real connection to it: another shard of the broken memory of memory and of history. Very few participants can take the play seriously, including its victim. Even the Vicario brothers do everything possible to be stopped from committing the murder. But the weight of convention, of habit, more than counterbalances the few weak protests and the town's inertia. Angela Vicario's random (perhaps) choice of name causes Santiago Nasar's murder but changes the course of her life, too. The official report by the magistrate includes a statement by Angela Vicario.

> When the investigating magistrate asked her with his oblique style if she knew who the decedent Santiago Nasar was, she answered him impassively:
>
> "He was my perpetrator." (p. 100)[8]

Angela's insistence at this critical moment that Santiago Nasar is her

perpetrator or author ("mi autor" in the original Spanish) is both striking and baffling. It emphasizes the arbitrary and personal creativity of fiction, Angela's sense of herself as a passive character in a fictional drama written by another, and the interrelationship of fiction and reality. But it is finally a spoof of all of these, and incomprehensible as well: we do not know why Angela would say this or what it means to her. It returns us to the "perplexity of the investigating magistrate" (p. 100) and his scribbled comments in the margins of the official court record, comments which reflect his perception of the impossibility of documenting reality. But however we may choose to interpret Angela's statement, once Santiago Nasar has been named, he does indeed become the creator of Angela's destiny as she has been the creator of his, within the text of this whirlpool of swirling, cycling, spiralling narrative.

Conclusion

On its simplest level, Chronicle of a Death Foretold is a search for satisfying explanations of why events occur as they do, of what motivates human behavior. The first sentences prefigure the book's concern with the nature of memory and our perception of reality as describable in words. The narrator's declared intention of reassembling "the broken mirror of memory" allows the scrutiny of many kinds of reflections: dream images, recollections and retrospective insights, repetitions and contradictions. Memory is both individual and collective; separate voices are joined in a town history. The

story of a small town murder becomes a chronicle of a universal need to understand the purpose of life. The fallibility of memory and of words is expanded into the impossibility of recovering the past objectively. We are able to perceive repeated patterns of behavior but the meaning of history eludes us. Words are an inadequate medium but they are all we have.

The insufficiency of language is manifest in a sequence of parodies or spoofs. Through a successive series of repetitions, modifications, exaggerations and understatements, a rhythm of complementary devaluation and affirmation is established. Parodied, mocked, undercut or even demolished are the validity of the legal system, the objectivity of historical record and of journalistic endeavor, the contemporary relevance of a traditional honor code, and the individual and collective ability of the townspeople to connect themselves responsibly to what they perceive as reality. Simultaneously, other values are affirmed or vindicated: the strength and complex tenacity of the human imagination, the power of words to <u>create</u> reality (Angela achieves identity through her letters; the investigating judge creates a reality he can accept; the narrator's recurrent bungling forces us, the readers, to interpret and judge what we think is happening), the <u>desire</u> of people to create and believe in fictions, in the unpredictable and irrational, in dreams and premonitions, in instinct and chance occurrences.

The narrator who returns to his home town to try to understand it and himself succeeds in neither (because of his own limits in

understanding) but through the spirals of repetitions and insights occasioned by his quest, García Márquez interweaves an allegorical reflection of larger dimension. The narrator and the townspeople of this "mislaid town" (p. 87) may be stagnated by asking the wrong questions, by seeking impossible reassurances and revelations, but we are invited as readers to see beyond their limitations and to reflect upon the nature of human society.

ENDNOTES

[1] Gabriel García Márquez in conversation with Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, El olor de la guayaba (Bogotá, Editorial la Oveja Negra, 1982), p. 65. Translation mine.

[2] Gabriel García Márquez as interviewed by Claudia Dreifus in Playboy, February, 1983, p. 70.

[3] All quotations from Gabriel García Márquez, Chronicle of a Death Foretold (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983). Translated from the Spanish by Gregory Rabassa.

[4] Interview with Gabriel García Márquez by Humberto Rios and Adolfo García Videla, "Gabriel García Márquez: El origen de mis historias es la imagen," Plural, Vol. XII-X, No. 142, July 1983, 7-10, p. 8.

[5] In El olor de la guayaba, García Márquez discusses this at some length and gives examples of some of the visual images which have focussed and served as points of departure for various stories and novels. He reiterates: "in other writers, I think, a book is born from an idea, a concept. My point of departure is always an image"

p.26).

[6] Ibid, p. 27.

[7] As in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, reprinted in The New York Times, Feb. 6, 1983, and in El olor de la guayaba, p. 36, García Márquez usually speaks of the marvels of the early chronicles and travel accounts as part of a discussion of how "everyday life in Latin America shows us that reality is full of extraordinary things" (Elolor, p. 36). Chronicle of a Death Foretold is also an example of a real occurence in which García Márquez sees (and describes) the extraordinary.

[8] The Spanish original of "`He was my perpetrator´" is "`Fue mi autor,´" which translates literally as "`He was my author.´" Chrónica de una muerte anunciada (Bogotá: Editorial la Oveja Negra, 1981), p. 131.